Culture and international society

BARRY BUZAN*

The relationship between culture and international society is crucial both to how the making of contemporary international society is understood, and to whether one should be optimistic or pessimistic about its prospects. In this article I focus on a much-quoted sentence from Martin Wight's *Systems of states*: 'We must assume that a states-system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members.'[1] This remark implies that 'cultural unity' is something distinct from international society and prior to it. Hedley Bull also accepted that the main historical cases of international societies studied by Wight 'were all founded upon a common culture or civilisation'.[2] According to Adam Watson, this understanding of common culture as the starting point for international society derived from A. H. L. Heeren, and was influential in the thinking of the British Committee.[3] As Jacinta O'Hagan notes, the question of culture 'subtly permeates the work of the English School … assumptions about culture are woven into the discussion of the constitution, maintenance and purposes of international society'. She also notes the persistent tension around whether the normative structure of international society reflects the nature and interests of a dominant culture or 'provides a platform for communication and interaction that supersedes particular cultural differences'.[4]

Wight's text thus underpins an English School hypothesis about the relationship between patterns of culture, understood as civilizational areas, on the one hand, and international society, understood as a society of states, on the other. The most direct form of the hypothesis is that *a shared culture is a precondition for the formation of a society of states*. A second hypothesis can be inferred: namely, that *a society of states lacking a shared culture because it has expanded beyond its original base will be unstable*. Wight hints at this instability problem when he comments: 'It may

[1] Martin Wight, *Systems of states* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 33.
[2] Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society* (London: Macmillan,1977), p. 16.
[3] Interview with Adam Watson, 13 August 2007. The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics met from the late 1950s to the early 1980s and laid much of the foundation for what later became known as the English School.
[4] Jacinta O'Hagan, 'The question of culture', in Alex J. Bellamy, ed., *International society and its critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 209.

be thought that in the history of the development of the Western states-system, diplomatic and technological interdependence have today outrun cultural and moral community.'[5]

Both of these readings set up the idea that culture can be either supportive or destructive of international society, the difference hanging on whether the two are coterminous geographically or not.[6] One difficulty with these hypotheses is, as Alan James observes, that Wight uses the term 'common culture' so loosely that it is unclear whether he has in mind a deep, historic sense of culture, or the more superficial agreed rules that compose a contractual society.[7] Wight was aware of the ambiguity. He noted the range of possibilities, from a little shared identity among elites to something much deeper, involving the population as a whole, but he took no position as to which was required, or what intermediate point on the spectrum between them would suffice.[8]

In this article I am going to concentrate on the second or *instability* hypothesis, which frames one of the central problems of English School thinking: has the expansion of European international society to global scale inevitably and permanently weakened the society of states by casting it against a multicultural world society that is unable to supply much 'cultural unity'? This issue is a core theme of the classic 1984 account of that story, *The expansion of international society*, and the acceptance of the instability hypothesis led to a generally pessimistic English School view of the prospects for post-colonial international society.[9] The underlying question is: how do the norms, rules and institutions of international society interact with the domestic life of polities rooted in different civilizations, and are international norms and institutions sustainable under these circumstances? The general thrust of the instability hypothesis can also be found in the debate about the tension between further integration of the European Union and the absence of any strong European identity among its citizens.[10]

In what follows I investigate the instability hypothesis by contrasting two accounts of the expansion story, *Vanguardist* and *Syncretist*,[11] and working out how

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[5] Wight, *Systems*, p. 34.
[6] On geographical co-location, see Christopher Weller, 'Collective identities in world society', in Mathias Albert, Lothar Brock and Klaus Dieter Wolf, eds, *Civilizing world politics: society and community beyond the state* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 45–68. This is a quite different issue from the other tension between world and international society in English School debates, which revolves around the problem of whether the raising of human rights located in the domain of world society destabilizes the society of states by undermining sovereignty. See Bull, *Anarchical society*, pp. 151–3; Hedley Bull, *Justice in international relations*, 1983–4 Hagey Lectures (Ontario: University of Waterloo, 1984), pp. 11–18; Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler, 'Hedley Bull's pluralism of the intellect and solidarism of the will', *International Affairs* 72: 1, Jan. 1996, pp. 91–107. Although different, these two concerns potentially merge if one raises the possibility that international societies might be the agents that construct world societies to fit them.
[7] Alan James, 'System or society?', *Review of International Studies* 19: 3, 1993, pp. 277–8.
[8] Wight, *Systems*, p. 34.
[9] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also Gerritt W. Gong, *The standard of 'civilization' in international society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); Yongjin Zhang, *China in international society since 1949* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
[10] Anthony D. Smith, 'National identity and the idea of European unity', *International Affairs* 68: 1, Jan. 1992, pp. 55–76.
[11] James Mayall, 'Democracy and international society', *International Affairs* 76: 1, Jan. 2000, pp. 62–3, also suggests that there are two expansion stories, the classical one built around Westphalian institutions, and his own, adding in the transformations in the institutions of western international society that began in the nineteenth century.

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these play into the options for where international society goes from here. The Vanguardist account emphasizes the centrality of Europe in the expansion story and projects a rather one-way view of cultural transmission from the West to the rest of the world. The Syncretist account puts more emphasis on the interplay of civilizations during the expansion process, and takes a more fluid and interactive view of cultural transmission generally. Both accounts are ideal types and neither represents a branch of thought within the English School. The Vanguardist version is closer to the main lines of the classical and pluralist accounts, but could easily be dismissed as a parody if taken to represent that whole literature.[12] The Syncretist account is closer to revisionist views within the English School, but again does not pretend to represent those views in anything like a complete or balanced way. The Vanguardist account is a well-established story that Europeans tell about themselves, based on knowledge of their own history. The Syncretist account is still emerging and requires a knowledge of world history that is still fairly weak in International Relations. What these two ideal types do is to bring into question the still strong Eurocentric tendencies in English School thinking, and to open the way to reimagining how we got to where we are now. That process in turn has far-reaching implications for prognostications about the likely future of international society. This approach cuts across the normal pluralist–solidarist classifications of English School thinking, and gets closer to the basic factors shaping understandings of international society.

Before working through these two accounts and their consequences, it helps to keep in mind that prior to them there are two models of expansion by which a global international society could have evolved from the late classical world. In that world there were several centres of civilization whose degree of contact with each other ranged from quite intense (the Islamic world with both Christendom and the Hindu world) through fairly thin (Christendom and China) to more or less absent (the civilizations of Eurasia and those of Meso-America and the Andean highlands). From that starting point, one way of reaching a global-scale international society would have been for the various civilizational cores of the classical world to expand into increased contact with each other, so requiring that they develop rules of the game to mediate their relations in a *polycentric* international society. In such a case, global international society would have developed on the basis of cultural diversity, perhaps along the lines shown by the Indian Ocean trading system before the European arrival. The other way would have been the takeover of the whole system by one civilizational core, the imposition of one culture on the others, and the absorption of all the others into its particular rules, norms and institutions. This *monocentric* model is close to most historical accounts of what actually happened.

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[12] For an account of the English School's expansion literature, both classical and revisionist, see Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'The historical expansion of international society', *Compendium*, forthcoming 2009.

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A Vanguardist account of the expansion of international society

By *Vanguardist* I mean espousing the idea common to both military strategy and Leninist thinking that a leading element plays a crucial role in how a social movement unfolds. Intentionality may or may not be a part of a Vanguard movement. That perspective is deeply, if implicitly, embedded in the way the English School has presented the story of how the European/western interstate society became global. In Vanguardist terms, the development of a global interstate society has been almost entirely a function of the expansion of the West. From the sixteenth century onwards, the rise of European power quickly crushed the two civilizational areas in the Americas and eroded, and eventually overwhelmed, the four in Eurasia. By the end of the nineteenth century virtually the whole of the international system was recreated in the image of Europe, as in the Americas and Australia; or directly subordinated to Europe, as in the African and Asian colonies; or desperately trying to catch up with Europe in order to avoid being colonized, as in the few most resilient parts of the classical world: the Ottoman empire, Japan and China. The triumph of European power meant not only that a sharp and permanent rise in the level of interaction took place, but also that western values and institutions—the so-called 'standard of civilization'—dominated the whole system in imperial fashion. This mixture of coercion and copying runs in close parallel to Kenneth Waltz's idea that anarchy generates 'like units' through processes of 'socialisation and competition'.[13] Looking at this process in Wendtian terms,[14] outsiders might emulate the core because of direct coercion, or by calculation or consent. Whatever the mechanisms and whatever the rationales, the effect is one of a subglobal Vanguard remaking the world in its own political image.

This account rests on a sharp distinction between West and non-West, and less sharp differentiations among the different cultures and civilizations within the non-West. It has parallels with other stories of expanding imperial cultures where westernization is a similar process to Sinification, Romanization, Russification, Islamization and suchlike. In explaining the breakout of one culture to dominate others, a Vanguardist account inevitably puts a lot of emphasis on cultural difference generally, and on the exceptionalism of the Vanguard culture in particular. As in much nineteenth-century European imperial discourse, exceptionalism easily drifts not only into a ranking of cultures from superior to inferior (civilized, barbarian, savage) but also into a racist ranking of peoples as superior and inferior.[15] Because it rests on differences of both culture and power, the Vanguardist account

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[13] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 74–7.
[14] Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 247–50. For discussion, see Barry Buzan, *From international to world society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 101–108.
[15] John M. Hobson, *The eastern origins of western civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 219–42; John R. Vincent, 'Race in international relations', *International Affairs* 58: 4, 1982, pp. 658–70; John R. Vincent, 'Racial equality', in Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*, pp. 239–54; W. Roger Louis, 'The era of the mandates system and the non-European world', in Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 201–13; Martin Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), pp. 49–98.

is highly sensitive to the way that changes in the distribution of power affect the hierarchy of cultures.

The Vanguardist account of the expansion story contains three distinct phases:

- The first phase saw the emergence and consolidation of a unique anarchical international society in late medieval and early modern Europe, built around the Westphalian institutions of sovereignty/non-intervention, balance of power, war, international law, diplomacy and Great Power management.[16] This is generally represented as a pristine development stemming from the internal dynamics of European civilization, and therefore culturally distinctive.

- The second phase saw the spread of this society from the late fifteenth century onwards to the rest of the world on the back of expanding European economic and military power, mainly in unequal colonial form but also in encounters with non-western societies that escaped colonization.[17]

- The third phase, following the Second World War, was decolonization, which saw the Third World admitted to equal membership of global international society. Decolonization put an end to the two-tier international society of the 'standard of civilization', with the right of independence and sovereign equality becoming almost unconditional. As everyone became a full member of international society, the colonial-era distinctions between 'civilized', 'barbarian' and 'savage' had to be abandoned. The focus of the Vanguardist story then turns to the consequences of this rapid move to universal membership, the problems it raises for the cohesion of international society and what, if anything, might be done about them.[18]

In terms of the instability hypothesis, the first two phases of the classical story are not problematic. Initially, European international society was more or less coterminous with the European cultural zone that gave birth to it. Expansion took international society beyond the European homeland, but nevertheless three mechanisms ensured that European culture remained dominant even as the expansion went all the way to the global scale. In some places (the Americas, Australia), Europeans colonized territory and became the main population. In other places (much of Africa and Asia), they took political and economic control and ruled over non-European cultures effectively enough to keep international society insulated from those cultures. And in the few remaining places that were neither occupied nor controlled (mainly Japan, China, the Ottoman empire and Persia), European pressure forced local cultures to adapt to a western 'standard of civilization' if they wanted to gain entry to international society.[19] The problem came in the

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[16] Bull, *The anarchical society*, pp. 27–40; Wight, *Systems*, pp. 153–73; Adam Watson, *The evolution of international society* (London: Routledge, 1992; 2nd edn 2009), pp. 138–262.

[17] Gong, *The standard of 'civilization'*; Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*; Watson, *The evolution of international society*.

[18] Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*; Watson, *The evolution of international society*; Bull, *Justice in international relations*.

[19] Gong, *The standard of 'civilization'*; Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and empire: China and Japan's encounter with European international society* (London: Routledge, 2009).

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third phase, when decolonization and the recognition of sovereignty quite rapidly brought the entire array of non-western cultures back into contact with the society of states on a basis of equality in legal terms, if not in terms of power. This created both inequality and cultural dilution, weakening international society compared to the first two phases.

The Vanguardist story for this phase follows the instability hypothesis and is thus pessimistic.[20] Decolonization triples the membership of international society and brings into it many post-colonial states that are politically weak and economically underdeveloped. It weakens the cultural foundations of international society by diluting the previously dominant European overlay. Now all the world's cultures, both great and small, are inside, and this moves Wight's question about the relationship between cultural cohesion and international society to centre stage. As Andrea Riemer and Yannis Stivachtis argue, 'the logic of anarchy, operating in the international system, has brought states into international society; once in, the logic of culture has determined their degree of integration into international society'.[21] On this logic, if culture was diverse, then international society could be only weakly integrated. On top of all this, the Cold War set the Great Powers at loggerheads, weakening international society still further.

Note that this account is Eurocentric in all three phases. The pristine emergence of a distinctive form of Westphalian international society gives Europe the foundational role. This society is then carried outward by Europeans to the rest of the world, and a 'standard of civilization' is imposed by the force of superior military and cultural power. Europe remakes the rest of the world in its own political and economic image. In the third phase, Europe cedes some political and cultural ground to the rest of the world, but it remains Vanguardist both as the enduring centre of world power and in continuing to drive forward the agenda of international society by trying to impose its internal values (human rights, democracy, the market) on the rest of international society. During phase three, Vanguardism is no longer driven primarily by military conquest. Yet it can work in other ways, as a lopsided distribution of power enables the strong to impose themselves on the weak through softer forms of coercion, usually labelled 'conditionality' and applied in relation to access to diplomatic recognition, aid, loans, markets, weapons and memberships of various clubs (most obviously NATO, the EU, the WTO and the various 'G' groups).

In addition to remaining Vanguardist in terms of promoting its own values as universal, the West during this phase is also on the defensive, trying to protect its own culture by bringing the rest of the world as much in line with it as possible.

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[20] Elsewhere I have argued that the classical English School's pessimism about the weakening of international society by its expansion to global scale had additional causes: a neglect of solidarist developments at the regional level, for example in the EU; failure to take account of the development of a world economy; and a degree of Eurocentric nostalgia for the cultural coherence of the colonial era. See Buzan, *From international to world society*, esp. pp. 212–17.

[21] Andrea K. Riemer and Yannis A. Stivachtis, 'European Union's enlargement, the English School and the expansion of regional international societies', in Andrea K. Riemer and Yannis A. Stivachtis, eds, *Understanding EU's Mediterranean enlargement: the English School and the expansion of regional international societies* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 27.

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Joseph Nye's argument that the US 'needs to establish international norms consistent with its society' and to get 'other countries to want what it wants' encapsulates this Vanguardist/defensive position perfectly.[22] It is also clear in Simon Bromley's account of post-1945 US foreign policy as needing to bring the rest of the world into line with its values before the spread of modernity undermines its relative power.[23] The US is perhaps unique in the degree to which it explicitly wants to impose its values on others for their own benefit, but history suggests that it is not unusual for dominant powers and cultures to think along the same lines and behave in pursuit of the same end.

The pessimistic view of the post-1945 expansion phase is clearly evident throughout Bull's *The anarchical society* and in some of the chapters in Bull and Watson's *The expansion of international society*.[24] Bull and Watson themselves were somewhat drawn into this feeling that, whatever its benefits in terms of justice, decolonization had dealt a blow to international society. They accepted the negatives of weak states and cultural fragmentation, but tried to balance them with the positive development of the general acceptance by Third World leaderships of some of the key institutions of international society—namely, sovereign and juridical equality—and up to a point also of western norms. They read the Third World as desirous more of improving its position within the existing international society than of overthrowing it.[25]

These concerns about cultural diversity were amplified by a closely correlated set of concerns about inequality. The non-West was mainly poor, which increased its sense of alienation from international society. Coming at the problems of post-colonial international society from the bottom up, rather than, as earlier, from the top down, Bull's later work was dominated by the problem of inequality, and the revolt against the West by Third World elites using western ideas. Bull used the tensions between order and justice in international society to develop a strong sense of the revolt of the former colonized world against western dominance, and the considerable success of its struggle to regain equality. The problem, to which he never found the answer, was how to deal with the political, economic and social consequences of inequality seeded by the creation of a Vanguardist global international society.[26] Robert O'Neill and John Vincent also noted the unequal relations between the West and the Third World and the consequent regional diversity of international society, with some Third World unity around non-alignment, development, and the elimination of colonialism and racism.[27] More recently, Scott Thomas presciently argued that religion had become part of

[22] Joseph S. Nye, 'Soft power', *Foreign Policy* 80, 1990, pp. 166–7.
[23] Simon Bromley, *American power and the prospects for international order* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), esp. pp. 8–37.
[24] Most notably Elie Kedourie, 'A new international disorder', and Adda Bozeman, 'The international order in a multicultural world', both in Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*, pp. pp. 347–56, 387–406. See also Watson, *The evolution of international society*, pp. 277–98.
[25] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, 'Conclusion', in Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*, pp. 425–35.
[26] Bull, *Justice in international relations*; Hedley Bull, 'The revolt against the West', in Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*, pp. 217–28.
[27] Robert O'Neill and R. J. Vincent, eds, *The West and the Third World: essays in honour of J. D. B. Miller* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 283–5.

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the revolt against the West.[28] The Vanguardist rendering of the third phase of the expansion story, with its emphasis on cultural diversity and the revolt against the West, thus interprets decolonization as the creation of a house divided: a coherent global imperial order of insiders and outsiders deteriorates into an incoherent global disorder where everyone is inside but their squabbles threaten to bring the house down.

In phase three, challenges to the West come in two forms. The first is that non-western powers manage to reduce inequality by developing, and then use their new power both to assert different cultural values and to resist the solidarist western values of human rights, democracy and the liberal market. The West has lost the dominance of the second phase, and its prospect is one of continued relative decline as countries like China, India and Iran acquire the elements of modernity, and the corresponding power, that the West has made available. Its only hope is that the homogenizing effects of capitalist development will reduce cultural difference at the same time as they redistribute power. But if culture is viewed in essentialist terms as more or less fixed, then in terms of the instability hypothesis the move to a multicultural foundation and a redistribution of power spells permanent trouble and weakness for international society. In this perspective, the solidarist campaigns for human rights and democracy are the direct heirs of the 'standard of civilization' from phase two, and thus part of the Vanguardist account.[29] The fear is that rising powers will use their increasing strength to assert their own cultures and values against those of the West, in the process both threatening the West and wrecking the foundations of international society. The defining cases here are Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union/Russia, and China. Suzuki's study of China's and Japan's encounter with western international society during the nineteenth century is revealing in this regard about the strategies of non-western powers. It shows Japan trying to conform to the 'standard of civilization' in order to be accepted into western international society, while China seeks to adopt selected elements of westernization in order to increase its strength to defend its own culture against the West.[30] A contemporary variant on this theme is provided by the strong movements in the Islamic world that oppose westernization.

The second type of challenge comes not from opposition combined with strength, but from weakness, whether oppositional or not. Part of the legacy of decolonization is an array of weak and failed polities that are unable to play their part in the game of states. Somalia, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

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[28] Scott M. Thomas, 'Taking religious and cultural pluralism seriously: the global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international society', *Millennium* 29: 3, 2000, pp. 815–41.

[29] As several writers have observed, the logic of human rights is the successor to the standard of civilization, albeit now *within* a universal international society rather than concerning the relations between insiders and outsiders. See Gong, *The standard of 'civilization',* pp. 90–93; Edward Keene, *Beyond the anarchical society: Grotius, colonialism and order in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 122–3, 147–8; Jack Donnelly, 'Human rights: a new standard of civilization?', *International Affairs* 74: 1, 1998, pp. 1–23; Robert H. Jackson, *The global covenant: human conduct in a world of states* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 287–93. Gong sees the persistent inequality in the world economy as perpetuating the 'standard of civilization' logic: Gerritt W. Gong, 'Standards of civilization today', in Mehdi Mozaffari, ed., *Globalization and civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 77–96.

[30] Suzuki, *Civilization and empire.*

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Afghanistan and other notional states represent holes in the fabric of international society. Their levels of internal disorder make it difficult to pursue the western agenda within them, and provide bases for criminals and terrorists acting against the West.

These two challenges define much of the agenda of international security during the third phase of the Vanguardist account. Inequality and cultural difference remain; the West, though weakening, still tries to impose its own values on the rest of the world; and the rising non-West still has to struggle with the challenge of how to relate to the still powerful western core.

These tensions are inherent in the fact that the Vanguardist model necessarily starts from relations of inequality and highlights 'the standard of civilization' as the key criterion to be fulfilled for non-western societies to gain membership. The monocentric route to global international society sets up tensions over how such a society is to evolve as the distribution of power reverts from the extreme concentration that allowed its creation in the first place (phase two) to something like the more even distribution that marked the late classical world (now approaching in phase three with the rise of China and the other BRICs). Thus, although the actual Vanguardist route to a global international society was close to the monocentric one, over time the more polycentric and multicultural pattern of the late classical world reappears, suggesting that we end up in the same place regardless of the route. But while this convergence might be true in the very long run, in the shorter run the monocentric model still carries a heavy baggage of inequality, and generates a set of political problems very different from those that would have arisen had we got here by the polycentric route. Thus, as several English School writers have discussed, although the legitimacy of contemporary international society is based on the decolonizing principle of the sovereign equality of states, and up to a point the equality of peoples and nations, it is still riddled with the hegemonic/hierarchical practices and inequalities of status left over from its monocentric, Vanguardist founding process.[31] It is thus still a long way from resolving the inequalities that marked its founding, and remains culturally and politically insecure. This problem of how to legitimize de facto hegemony in the face of the strong post-colonial normative commitment to sovereign equality still echoes on, and is particularly acute for the US as the leading western power. David Calleo argues that, for the US, 'hegemony is likely to remain the recurring obsession of its official imagination, the *idée fixe* of its foreign policy'.[32] Yet, as Ian Clark notes, de facto US dominance lacks legitimacy in the absence of 'a satisfactory principle of hegemony—rooted in a plausibly wide consensus—in which that

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[31] Watson, *The evolution of international society*, pp. 299–309, 319–25; Adam Watson, *The limits of independence: relations between states in the modern world* (London: Routledge, 1997); Gong, *The standard of 'civilization'*, pp. 7–21; Ian Clark, *The hierarchy of states: reform and resistance in the international order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Andrew Hurrell, *On global order: power, values and the constitution of international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 13, 35–6, 63–5, 71, 111–14. Tim Dunne, 'Society and hierarchy in international relations', *International Relations* 17: 3, 2003, pp. 303–20, even questions whether after 9/11 US policy amounted to suzerainty, moving it outside international society.
[32] David P. Calleo, 'The tyranny of false vision: America's unipolar fantasy', *Survival* 50: 5, 2008, p. 62.

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actuality would be enshrined'.[33] Stefano Guzzini concurs, noting that 'US primacy that is not embedded in a legitimate world order undermines US security'.[34]

As should by now be clear, in the Vanguardist account a great deal hangs on the issue of culture and international society. During parts of the second phase, it was easy to find culturally essentialist and racist views that inscribed permanent superiority to white/western civilization. But that extreme view has not been the dominant one in the Vanguardist account. The 'standard of civilization' was set as something that *could* be met by non-western states provided they conformed to western practices and institutions, and ideally also subscribed to the values that underpinned them. In the second phase the whole logic of the 'standard of civilization' presupposed that there was a degree of cultural malleability: at least some non-European societies could be brought into line with European legal, economic, diplomatic and moral practices. This one-way view of cultural malleability reflected arrogance towards 'barbarian' cultures comparable to similar attitudes found in the Islamic world and China. And, as discussed by Gerritt Gong, the necessities of interaction among equals required standards of effective government: the western desire for access (trade, proselytizing, travel) drove the functional aspects of the 'standard of civilization' (to protect life, liberty and property) and therefore the demand for extraterritoriality and unequal relations where the locals could not or would not provide these.[35] Adapting to the 'standard of civilization' posed demanding cultural challenges to the non-West, much of which had to go against its own cultural grain in order to gain entry.

But although the main burden of cultural adaptation fell on the non-West, Gong also argues that the expansion of European international society required a steady loosening of identity concepts *in the core*, starting with 'Christendom' in the emergence phase, then shifting to 'European culture' (to bring in the Americas and other European offshoots during the decolonization of settler states in the Americas during the nineteenth century), and finally to the 'standard of civilization' in the late nineteenth century, when non-western powers began to demand entry.[36] This sequence can easily be extended to include today's western demands for 'good governance'. The idea that cultural malleability might be a two-way street opens the way to a consideration of the Syncretist account of the expansion of international society.

A Syncretist account of the expansion of international society

The Syncretist account is based on the idea that it is the normal condition of human affairs for cultural ideas to flow between areas of civilization. Cultures thus evolve not only in response to their own internal dynamics, but also because of encounters

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[33] Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 227–43, 254.

[34] Stefano Guzzini, 'Foreign policy without diplomacy: the Bush administration at a crossroads', *International Relations* 16: 2, 2002, p. 296.

[35] Gong, *The standard of 'civilization'*, pp. 24–53, 64–93.

[36] Gong, *The standard of 'civilization'*, esp. pp. 4–6; see also Watson, 'New states in the Americas', in Bull and Watson, *Expansion*, pp. 127–41.

with other cultures, even remote ones. Obviously there has to be some contact in order for syncretism to function, but the interaction capacity requirements for the transmission of ideas are low, which makes such transmission the normal expectation.[37] Both John Hobson and Victoria Hui, for example, point out how small numbers of Europeans visiting China from the thirteenth century onwards brought back crucial information about Chinese technology and politics, and Jerry Bentley shows how even the fairly thin trading systems of the ancient and classical world served as cross-cultural transmission belts for religions.[38] Buddhism was carried from India to East Asia, and Islam from the Arab world to Africa and Asia. Where contact was closer, and interaction capacity higher, as between Europe and the Islamic world, and within the trading system of the Indian Ocean, there was a lot of movement of ideas. While the Syncretist account does not equate to the polycentric model of how global international society formed, it does lean in that direction. Parts of the Syncretist account, such as the long encounter between Europe and Islamic civilization, look very much like how the polycentric model would have worked. Wight, indeed, provocatively speculates that medieval Europe picked up the idea of crusade from the Islamic practice of jihad.[39] The Syncretist account is also consistent with the monocentric expansion model, but it does modify significantly the Vanguardist account of that model.

The Syncretist account challenges the strong Vanguardist distinction between West and non-West, and its corollaries of western exceptionalism and superiority. Basic to that questioning is a retelling of the first two phases of the expansion story in such a way as to blur the distinction between them almost to the point of invisibility. Rather than European international society emerging pristine out of a unique and self-contained European civilization, in the Syncretist account the development phase in Europe involves very significant interaction with the other civilizations of Eurasia and North Africa. As Wight notes, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the crusades brought Europe into close contact with the Islamic world, adding to the contact already created by the earlier Islamic occupation of Spain, the two episodes together serving as 'the channel for the acculturation of medieval Christendom'.[40] Almost at the same time, the Mongol conquest of much of Eurasia brought Europe into contact with China and enabled increased transmission of ideas. The rise of the Ottoman empire from the late thirteenth century, and its conquest of Constantinople in 1453, meant that a rising Europe was neighbour to, and in regular contact with, a hostile and powerful non-European culture. Given that classical Greece is sometimes used as a comparator for Europe

[37] Interaction capacity refers to the amount of transportation, communication and organizational capacity within the system: how much in the way of information, goods and people can be moved over what distances, at what speeds and at what cost. See Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International systems in world history: remaking the study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 80–84.
[38] Hobson, *Eastern origins*, p. 168; Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and state formation in ancient China and early modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 148; Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World encounters: cross-cultural contacts and exchanges in pre-modern times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe*, 3 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 1970, 1993).
[39] Wight, *Systems*, p. 34.
[40] Wight, *International theory*, p. 52.

in discussions of the relationship between culture and international society, it is a nice irony that the Ottoman modifier to the story of a pristine European development runs in close parallel to the way in which the Persian empire shared a system with the city states of classical Greece, initially as the greater power, and then as the victim of Greek expansion.[41] Nuri Yurdusev shows how the Ottoman empire interacted with early modern Europe and played a role in the development of what later become known as the Westphalian institutions of European international society: the balance of power, diplomacy, international law and great power management.[42] This encounter gives us a glimpse of what the multicultural creation of a polycentric international society would have looked like. During its putative first phase, Europe was neither isolated nor powerful. It was a relatively poor, weak and backward place on the periphery of a Eurasian system of powerful empires, and was absorbing from other more advanced cultures many of the ideas that were to play strongly in its own development.

Geographical luck gave the Europeans first access to the Americas, where, much aided by diseases to which the local inhabitants had no immunity, they were easily able to displace and destroy both the peoples and the less technologically advanced civilizations they found there.[43] The takeover of the Americas enabled Europe to link together the trading systems of the eastern and western hemispheres for the first time, and so seize the central position in the global political economy.[44] Yet despite this huge starting advantage in creating a global system, the Europeans entered Asia as relatively weak and primitive players. In effect, as Richard Little argues, they did not expand into a vacuum, but had to engage with a well-developed set of existing international societies, and a huge and sophisticated Asian trading system that long pre-dated their arrival.[45] Detailed studies of treaties by C. H. Alexandrowicz, and of legal regimes and their encounters by Lauren Benton, show how much of a two-way street this encounter was.[46] For example, when Grotius argued in the seventeenth century that Europeans should accept the principle that the high seas constituted international territory, the Indian Ocean provided the leading precedent for this principle. During this period, Alexandrowicz argues, an encounter between 'two worlds took place on a footing of equality and the ensuing commercial and political transactions, far from being in a legal vacuum, were governed by the law of nations as adjusted to local inter-state custom … [which was] in no way inferior' to that of the Europeans.[47]

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[41] Wight, *Systems*, pp. 46–109.
[42] Nuri Yurdusev, 'The Middle East encounter with the expansion of European international society', in Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez, eds, *International society and the Middle East* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 70–79.
[43] Jared Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel: the fates of human societies* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 67–81; William H. McNeill, *Plagues and peoples* (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 185–200.
[44] David Christian, *Maps of time: an introduction to big history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 364–5.
[45] Richard Little, 'The English School and world history', in Bellamy, ed., *International society and its critics*, pp. 45–63.
[46] C. H. Alexandrowicz, *An introduction to the history of the law of nations in the East Indies: 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); C. H. Alexandrowicz, *The European–African connection: a study in treaty making* (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1973); Lauren Benton, *Law and colonial cultures: legal regimes in world history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[47] Alexandrowicz, *An introduction*, p. 224.

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In this Syncretist perspective, even modernity is not a specifically European or western creation, but a globally generated phenomenon.[48] Because of its conquest of the Americas, Europe was fortunate enough to find itself in the central position of this development, and flexible enough to make the most of the opportunity. But it was not the pristine, exceptionalist generator of all the technologies and ideas that gave rise to modernity. As Hobson chronicles in detail, Europe absorbed from China, the Islamic world and India many of the technologies and commercial innovations that underpinned its rise, a process he labels 'oriental globalisation'.[49] Telling the story in this way reduces both European exceptionalism and the gap between Europe and the rest of the world. It also shortens the real period of western domination (other than in the Americas) from half a millennium to something more like 200 years. Europe did not begin decisively to outpace the other centres of Eurasian civilization in terms of technology, wealth and ideas until the late eighteenth century. In the Vanguardist account, one gets no more than hints that Europe did not expand into a social vacuum, but instead only slowly imposed its own style of international society onto a previously existing system of several regional international societies, each reflecting a local culture.[50]

Although the Syncretist and Vanguardist accounts of expansion differ quite markedly for the first phase of the story and much of the second, by the time we get to the nineteenth century there is less difference between them. During that century Europe and the West underwent internal transformations that made them hugely more powerful and dominant. Syncretism did not cease to operate, but it became much more like the one-way traffic from core to periphery of the Vanguardist account. The West became powerful enough to promote its own 'standard of civilization' as universal, and to force the non-West to conform to western rules and practices. This development created a double problem for the non-West. Not only did increased western power make the one-way cultural imperialism of the West much harder to resist, but since the West was also under-going deep political transformations the nature of the culture it projected was itself undergoing radical change. In order to get to grips with how Syncretism functioned during this period, one needs to get a sense of what those changes in Europe were.

As Justin Rosenberg notes, although the nineteenth century is a pivotal period in the making of the modern international system/society, it is largely ignored in IR.[51] It is also ignored in the Vanguardist account, where the nineteenth century is seen as the apex of European power, not as a point of transformation in itself. The nineteenth century is mainly featured in the encounter stories of China and Japan. The exception is James Mayall, who focused on it with his pioneering account of the rise of nationalism and the market as new institutions of international society. Mayall showed how these institutions are often in tension both with each

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[48] Christian, *Maps of time*, pp. 351ff; Hobson, *Eastern origins*.
[49] Hobson, *Eastern origins*, pp. 2, 31–49.
[50] Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*, p. 1; Watson, *The evolution of international society*, pp. 265–76.
[51] Justin Rosenberg, *The empire of civil society* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 162.

other and the classical Westphalian institutions.[52] He also put the contemporary economic and political consequences of expansion into perspective as Third World states struggled to cope with institutions and practices, particularly nationalism, designed by and for the core states.[53]

To get a deeper look at these changes within the West one needs to turn to writers such as Ernest Gellner and Karl Polanyi,[54] who put what Polanyi called 'the Great Transformation' from an agrarian to an industrial and capitalist mode of production as beginning in the late eighteenth century and taking off in the nineteenth. In this perspective, industrialism and finance transformed both the mode and the relations of production, in the process creating not just a new type of state but a new kind of social order (capitalism) in the western core. It was that new type of social order that began to be projected outward by the West during the nineteenth century, and it is in the nature of that transformation that one finds the changes in the institutions of international society studied by Mayall. This perspective aligns with much of modern sociology, which has focused on the rise of modernity and the unfolding of social forms based on ever-increasing functional differentiation.[55] It raises the possibility that there have in fact been two equally important transformations of world-historical significance within the last half-millennium: the one of system scale around 1500,[56] and the one of mode of production during the nineteenth century.

Two works from very different perspectives capture clearly both the nature of this nineteenth-century transformation and its deep implications for the Syncretist view of the expansion story: Rosenberg's *The empire of civil society* and Douglass North and colleagues' *Violence and social orders*.[57] I feature them in this section on Syncretism even though their argument about power difference seems closer to the Vanguardist story, because the Vanguardist story does not feature the nineteenth century as transformational, and because the nature of the great transformation that happened then offers great insight into how Syncretism has worked during the past two centuries to shape the institutions of modern international society. Both books agree with Gellner about the historical singularity of modernity, and how different its social relations are from other social forms.[58]

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[52] James Mayall, *Nationalism and international society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). This line of thinking has been taken forward by K. J. Holsti, *Taming the sovereigns: institutional change in international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and Buzan, *From international to world society?*, pp. 161–204, 228–70, who make the case for seeing the institutions of international society as being in continuous evolution.

[53] Mayall, *Nationalism*, pp. 45–63, 111–44.

[54] Ernest Gellner, *Plough, sword and book: the structure of human history* (London: Paladin, 1988); Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1957; first publ. 1944). One could add to this the literature on modernization theory, e.g. Walt Rostow, *The stages of economic growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). For a different interpretation of Europe's nineteenth-century self-strengthening, see Hui, *War and state formation*, pp. 231–3. See also Fred Halliday, 'The Middle East and conceptions of "international society"', in Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez, eds, *International society and the Middle East*, pp. 19–20.

[55] For discussion, see Barry Buzan and Mathias Albert, 'Differentiation: a sociological approach to international relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16: 3, 2010.

[56] Buzan and Little, *International systems*, pp. 393–406.

[57] Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and social orders: a conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[58] Gellner, *Plough*, pp. 62–9, 145–71.

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Rosenberg wants to replace the problematic of anarchy in IR with that of modernity, and like Polanyi he sees the essence of modernity as the separation of economics and politics.[59] He shows how, prior to modernity, all social orders represented a fusion of economics and politics and were ways of allowing an elite to expropriate economic surpluses: 'once the wealth-creating properties of a free market were understood, the state conceived an interest in allowing the latter to regulate itself, and increasingly restricted its own activity to the more properly political functions of government'.[60] 'The process of surplus extraction is reconstituted as a private activity of civil society. This is called economics',[61] and 'if political functions which used to be in state hands are now assigned to a private political sphere fronted by a set of exchange relations, then these political functions will travel,'[62] meaning that they spill beyond the political boundaries of the state into the wider relations of the international system. This structure he calls 'the empire of civil society', having 'a public political aspect which concerns the management of the states-system, and a private political aspect which effects the extraction and relaying of surpluses'.[63] Although the concept of the 'empire of civil society' is mainly aimed at capturing the outward projection of the market by non-state actors, and the structure of international political economy, it has echoes in English School concerns about how the global civil society (or world society) composed of thousands of non-state actors now operates strongly across international society, yet remains principally based in the West and reflective of western values.[64] Rosenberg's driving question is: 'In what kind of society do distinct institutional spheres of politics and economics open out in this way and why?'[65]

North and his colleagues provide an answer to Rosenberg's question by focusing on the transition from what they call *natural states* (or 'limited access orders') to *open access orders*. They agree that this transition happened in the nineteenth century,[66] in the leading western states. They also agree that all pre-modern societies, which they see as forms of the natural state, are marked by the fusion of economics and politics: 'economics is politics by other means'[67]—power is control of the trough. Natural states have been the dominant political form for most of human history and are still common today. They are marked by dispersal of control over the means of violence, personal relationships (patron–client), and preferential access to rents for elites. They achieve scale and stability by creating dominant elite coalitions whose rents increase if violence is limited, but they limit access to organizational

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[59] Rosenberg, *Empire*, pp. 6, 3.
[60] Rosenberg, *Empire*, p. 121.
[61] Rosenberg, *Empire*, p. 125.
[62] Rosenberg, *Empire*, p. 129.
[63] Rosenberg, *Empire*, p. 131.
[64] Hurrell, *On global order,* pp. 111–14; Ian Clark, *International legitimacy and world society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 183; David Armstrong, 'Globalization and the social state', *Review of International Studies* 24: 4, 1998, pp. 461–78.
[65] Rosenberg, *Empire*, p. 3.
[66] North et al., *Violence*, pp. 256–7, 261. North and his colleagues do not appear to have read Rosenberg and are not therefore addressing his question specifically.
[67] North et al., *Violence*, p. 72.

forms and have limited tolerance for organizations that are not within the elite networks. North et al. stress that natural states are not sick or unnatural. They are a different type of political structure from open access orders, and although they are less efficient, less prosperous and less adaptive than open access orders, they nevertheless do limit violence and do 'provide for two of the basic tasks of all societies: stability and order'.[68]

Open access orders are marked by centralization of control over violence, impersonal (i.e. contractual, rule-governed) relationships, giving people rights and allowing mass access to rents, big government, and a general openness to the creation of private (and public) organizations that are long-lived in their own right (i.e. not dependent on individual leaders to reproduce themselves). On this latter point they put particular emphasis on the development of private corporations and political parties. North et al. agree with Rosenberg that the formal separation of politics and economics is a defining feature of this transformation; and, like Rosenberg, they argue that this seeming separation disguises the fact that the two are in fact closely linked in a unique division of labour, with the market economy addressing many social problems, and government becoming both more limited in its functions and more pervasive in its regulations. This leads to a view shared by many Marxists, that while open access orders make the separation of economics and politics look natural and timeless, it is in fact recent and historically unprecedented, and is the defining feature of modernism. The centrality of this separation to open access orders means that, from their perspective, the patron–client arrangements of natural states, which openly fuse the economic and the political, 'appear inherently corrupt'.[69] Like Gellner, North et al. conclude that the transition to modernity is difficult and dangerous, indeed almost miraculous, because developments that favour the move towards open access orders tend to destabilize natural states, threatening not transition but violence and chaos.[70]

In this perspective, the nineteenth century becomes a period of major world-historical transformation. The leading western states radically remade their internal social structures, and in so doing remade how they related to the rest of the world. Open access orders rapidly became substantially richer and more powerful than the rest of the world, which created the familiar power gap. Another, possibly more significant, gap emerged between two forms of socio-political structure: open access orders and natural states. Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the open access orders evolved from absolutist natural states, through nationalism and popular sovereignty, into fully fledged democratic open access orders.[71] This much-discussed process was hardly smooth, involving four world wars (Napoleonic, First, Second and Cold), mainly, though not wholly, between the open access orders and the remaining natural states within the core. These wars steadily expanded the sphere of open access orders, leading to the eventual triumph

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[68] North et al., *Violence*, p. 269.
[69] North et al., *Violence*, p. 37.
[70] See also Samuel Huntington, *Political order in changing societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
[71] Buzan and Little, *International systems*, pp. 251–5.

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of liberal modernity over various authoritarian and totalitarian alternatives.[72] As Rosenberg points out, the Cold War was about the communist states (which were natural states in North et al.'s terms) seeking to withdraw from the empire of civil society by taking over the private sphere and closing their borders.[73]

As open access orders took deeper root in the leading states, those states' relationship with the periphery shifted from the imperialism of direct territorial control typical of natural state empires to the demand for access typical of 'the empire of civil society'. Open access orders make permeable the boundaries of territorial states and generate a transnational economic, social and political space in which private non-state actors can operate alongside, within and through the formal political sphere of states.[74] Since the leading colonial powers were also the most developed open access orders, their evolving domestic structures became incompatible with old-style imperialism, a process helped by the weakening of Britain and France by the First and Second World Wars. These two wars also undermined European pretensions to 'civilization' as Europeans applied to each other the racist attitudes, colonial practices and violent brutalities that they had previously reserved for their relations with non-Europeans.[75] The transformation, beginning in the nineteenth century, to open access orders among the leading powers thus pushed towards the decolonization that took place after 1945. This argument connects with Bull's discussion of the Third World's revolt against the West, all of whose demands for justice were based on the values of open access orders. Decolonization exposed and exacerbated the tensions between the open access orders of the western core (First World) and the mainly natural states of the Third World, many of which felt more comfortable in the company of the Soviet bloc states. By the second half of the twentieth century open access orders dominated the core, and China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, plus the end of the Cold War in 1989, marked the final victory of liberal modernism over its last totalitarian, natural state, ideological challengers. But while the core increasingly organized itself as a transnational open access order ('the zone of peace'), much of the periphery remained in natural state form, unable to avoid deep structural tensions with the open access order. At some risk of oversimplification, one might characterize this story as being about a shift from struggles mainly *within* the western core, between rising open access orders and the remaining natural states, to a two-level struggle both *between* a western core largely composed of open access orders and a periphery mainly dominated by natural states, and *within* the states of the periphery.

What are the implications of this world-historical transformation for the Syncretist account of the expansion of international society? For one thing, it explains why the 'standard of civilization' became a particularly salient issue during the nineteenth century (although there was a prequel to it in the European encounter with the Stone Age civilizations of the Americas). Not only had a large gap of power

[72] For a complementary account of this expansion from a different perspective, see Daniel H. Deudney, *Bounding power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 136–264.
[73] Rosenberg, *Empire*, p. 134.
[74] Buzan and Little, *International systems*, pp. 362–7.
[75] Wight, *International theory*, p. 61.

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and wealth opened up, but so had the gap between open access orders and natural states. The structural tension between natural states trying to maintain the degree of closure necessary to their internal stability and open access orders demanding a degree of penetration and liberalization for their own (mainly economic) purposes could (and did) destabilize natural states. A corollary of this is the development noted by Alexandrowicz and others that by the end of the eighteenth century the often fairly equal relations between Europeans and non-Europeans that had rested on foundations of natural law were breaking down into the much more unequal categories of the 'standard of civilization'. By the nineteenth century, as part of their transformation, Europeans were moving away from natural law towards positive law, in the process constituting a purely western legal system based on the principle of mutual consent. As a consequence, non-European states (mainly in Asia) that in the past had been acknowledged as fully sovereign states were now viewed only as potential candidates for admission into a European international society. Relations with the non-European world were redefined in a very fundamental way, with the Europeans now viewing themselves as 'civilized' top dogs, and others as barbarians or savages.[76]

It was not just the size of this gap between core and periphery that mattered, but also its composition. As the western core made the transition from natural states to open access orders, the kind of institutions it projected outward into international society began to change. This is the process chronicled by Mayall in relation to the rise of nationalism and the market. Decolonization required the Third World to adopt western political forms as the price of independence and membership of international society. As Jack Donnelly argues, international society can thus be seen as open (because, although European in origin, others can join if they meet specific terms and conditions) or as imperial (in seeming to offer pluralism while in fact requiring extensive westernization).[77] It is not surprising that there was and is a noticeable difference between Third World reactions to some of the institutions being promoted by the West and their reactions to others. While it is easy to point to cultural differences to explain such reactions, they can also be explained by the difference between open access orders and natural states. The process of Syncretism, operating largely one-way during the peak of the West's power in the making of a monocentric international society, had very uneven results. Those institutions that were compatible with natural states (mainly the Westphalian ones—sovereignty, non-intervention, territoriality, diplomacy, some aspects of international law, but also the main nineteenth-century one, nationalism) were easily and deeply absorbed by most of the non-West. Natural states could feel comfortable with these institutions, which were designed for and by natural states, and did not threaten their domestic arrangements. This explains

[76] Alexandrowicz, *An introduction*, p. 156. See also Paul Keal, 'Just backward children: international law and the conquest of the non-European peoples', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 49: 2, 1995, pp. 191–206; Paul Keal, *European conquest and the rights of indigenous peoples: the moral backwardness of international society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Tim Dunne, 'Colonial encounters in international relations: reading Wight, writing Australia', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 51: 3, 1997, pp. 309–23; Wight, *International theory*, pp. 49–98.
[77] Donnelly, 'Human rights', pp. 1–11.

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why those institutions have been strongly taken up not just by the elites of many non-western states, but also by their peoples. Nationalism and sovereignty, for example, have become naturalized in most of the world despite their European origins and coercive imposition.

But the liberal institutions of open access orders, especially the later twentieth-century ones of democracy and individualist human rights, are much more intrusive and transnational. They reflect the values and practices of evolved open access orders, and are necessarily threatening to the internal structures of natural states, where they may also threaten some cultural practices. This offers cultural difference as a political resource to the elites of natural states seeking to defend themselves against western pressure. The open access orders of the West are able to live fairly comfortably with the contradictions between the more liberal institutions (market, democracy, human rights and their associated elements of international law) and the more Westphalian ones (sovereignty, territoriality, non-intervention, diplomacy), using nationalism to bridge the gap between them. But since the transition from natural state to open access order remains difficult and dangerous, resistance to this mix in natural states is perfectly rational. Regardless of cultural issues, the intrusion of open access values and practices might as easily lead to chaos and a failed state as to a successful transition to an open access order. Regardless of the normative arguments, the supporting conditions for human rights and democracy are simply not yet available in much of the Third World, as Mayall argues.[78]

Perhaps most interesting here is the relationship between natural states and the market—and more broadly the ideology of progress. The market and progress are without doubt core characteristics of open access orders, and the market in particular was crucial to the long struggle between natural states and open access orders within the West that spanned much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Non-democratic natural states, both fascist and communist, tried to coopt the idea of progress while resisting the market. By 1990, however, it was clear that neither progress nor power could in the long run be had by denying the market, and since then this institution of open access orders has become much more widely, if not quite universally, accepted. Among the open access orders, the market is generally accepted on ideational grounds. Elsewhere its acceptance is more instrumental. In post-Soviet Russia, the separation between economics and politics is increasingly challenged by a reassertion of state control. The great experiment in China, where a natural state has, up to a point, embraced the market, hangs in the balance: will the market destabilize the natural state or enable it to make the transition to an open access order?

To sum up: the Syncretist view is that culture and international society are both malleable. They can and do change; cross-cultural interactions are the normal condition of international society, and flow in many directions. The Syncretist account suggests that for two reasons there is less cultural difference between the West and the rest of the world than the Vanguardist account supposes. First, the emergence of European international society was not a pristine process but took

[78] James Mayall, *World politics: progress and its limits* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

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place during a long period of sustained cultural interaction with the other civilizations of Eurasia and North Africa. Europe received many inputs, and is already a result of cultural fusions. Although the monocentric model captures much of the historical reality, the polycentric model was far from absent from the process. Second, the hegemonic transmission outward of western values and institutions since the nineteenth century has in some respects been rather successful, with many of the older, natural state, institutions of western international society being widely and deeply accepted in the non-West.

This record is better than acknowledged by the glimmers of hope expressed in the original (1984) telling of the expansion story, which suggested that the existence of a global elite sharing a westernized culture might act as a bulwark against disintegrative multiculturalism. It leans towards Watson's more optimistic mooting of the possibility of a new cultural synthesis.[79] The main difference is perhaps more political than cultural: that between open access orders and natural states. As Japan and Korea show, and India and China soon might, non-western cultures can maintain their civilizational distinctiveness within open access orders, even if they adopt some western political institutions. Indeed, so deep has been the impact on the West of other cultures, and so deep the impact on other cultures of the West, that one has to consider agreeing with Fred Halliday that the distinction between 'West' and 'non-West' is not tenable.[80] The Syncretic account underpins an expectation that cultural and political interaction and co-evolution will increase as the density of contact increases. This might well produce likeness in some respects, though there is no expectation that it should or will produce cultural or political homogeneity. What the Syncretic account indicates is that international society and its political and cultural underpinnings evolve together. Because this happens, there is less of a cultural/civilizational crisis in international society than the Vanguardist account would suggest.

The futures of international society

In addition to the monocentric and polycentric models of how a global international society *could have been* formed, we now have the Vanguardist and Syncretist accounts of *how it was* formed. Both accounts are built mainly around the monocentric model, with elements of polycentrism in the Syncretist account, but they differ markedly in how they tell the story. The Vanguardist account makes much more of the cultural difference between the West and the rest and dates the dominance of Europe from the late fifteenth century. The Syncretist account sees much more cultural mixing and considerably less difference, and dates the dominance of the West from the nineteenth century. The polycentric model remains relevant not just because of its role in the Syncretist account, but also because the structure of the contemporary international system is moving towards a power distribution

[79] Ronald Dore, 'Unity and diversity in contemporary world culture', in Bull and Watson, eds, *The expansion of international society*, pp. 407–24; Watson, *The evolution of international society*, pp. 307–308.
[80] Halliday, 'The Middle East and conceptions of "international society"', pp. 11–13.

reminiscent of that of the late classical world in which several different civilizations were major centres of power. This development raises the question of whether the two *models* are converging on a common form even though their starting assumptions are very different. The two *accounts*, with their different assumptions about and interpretations of the role of culture, enable one to see more clearly how this convergence might come about. There are four possible ideal-type outcomes. In considering these, it is useful to keep in mind Wight's discussion of the different ways in which 'civilized' and 'barbarian' might relate to each other. He argued that *realists* claim the right to eliminate, displace and/or contain the barbarians, *rationalists* think that barbarians also have the right to self-government, equality and coexistence, and *revolutionists* want to assimilate the barbarians by converting them to the ideology of the civilized.[81]

Vanguard homogenization

This outcome envisages the triumph of the Vanguardist process. Either the Vanguard displaces and replaces other cultures, or it converts the rest of the world to its own standard of civilization, creating a universal culture based on a widespread acceptance of Western values, practices and institutions. We know that replacement did not and will not happen, so this outcome now rests on the success of westernization: in Wight's terms, a revolutionist programme of assimilation. Here we find those pluralists who are desperate to maintain western power for long enough to complete the assimilation, and those solidarists eager to promote 'universal' values and to convert everyone to the market, democracy and human rights. We also find those who think that Vanguard homogenization will result from the global operation of economic, cultural and political forces (capitalism) carrying a modernizing logic indistinguishable from westernization. The expectation is that the resulting 'westernistic' international society will be strong and fairly uniform at the global level—something like the OECD writ large.[82] The world would become an open access order with a full set of liberal values. The 'degree of cultural unity' necessary to stabilize international society would come from the success of westernization, and would go a long way towards mitigating the contradiction between hegemonic practice and the legitimating principle of sovereign equality in present-day international society. This outcome would eliminate O'Hagan's tension as to whether international society represents the values of a dominant culture or a neutral mode of communication across cultures.

Syncretic homogenization

This outcome envisages the triumph of cultural mixing and adaptation. It is therefore in principle not wedded to any particular set of values, practices and institutions, but is normatively open, allowing these to emerge in the syncretic

[81] Wight, *International theory*, pp. 49–98.
[82] Barry Buzan and Gerald Segal, *Anticipating the future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 184–5.

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process. In practice, since the Syncretist account largely accepts the monocentric model, the actual homogenization would reflect the considerable success that the West has already had in projecting onto other cultures many of its values, practices and institutions: sovereignty, diplomacy, nationalism, the market and so on. The expectation here is also that international society will be strong and fairly uniform at the global level, but not exclusively based on western values. Rather, some mixture will emerge as western power wanes and the power and influence of non-western cultures rise. Here too we can find those who think that homogenization will result from the global operation of capitalism, though in this version the undoubted cultural carrying capacity of the global market will work both ways, with the West being as transformed as transforming by the cultural flows across the planet. There is plenty of Syncretist evidence to point to here, from the popularity of Asian food, fashion and film, and African music, in the West to the global adoptions of Japanese management practices and Indian, Japanese and Chinese philosophy. The 'degree of cultural unity' necessary to stabilize international society would come from such fusions, working towards a shared global culture. This would be a process of mutual assimilation not envisaged in Wight's scheme. Such an outcome would also eliminate O'Hagan's tension. It would go a long way towards mitigating the contradiction between hegemonic practice and the legitimating principle of sovereign equality in present-day international society, not least by making a multipolar Great Power management easier.

Layered

This outcome envisages the partial failure of both the Vanguardist project and the process of Syncretism. Such failure might occur for various reasons. The West might lose power before it can convert the rest. Political and cultural resistance in the non-West might be strong, particularly against the more recent and more liberal elements of Western international society. The rise of the non-West might trigger a defensive reaction (highly visible in Huntington's call for a 'fortress West' in *The clash of civilizations*) that would resist the process of syncretic homogenization.[83] China might decide that, rather than trying to come to terms with western liberal values, it would be more comfortable within a regional club of states that shared its priorities of strong sovereignty, non-intervention, regime security, cultural distinctiveness, nationalism and managed economic development. The outcome would be a layered international society, evolving from the present postcolonial structure in which the West still has a privileged, but partly contested, hegemonic role, and non-western regions are in varying degrees subordinate to western power and values.[84] As the western vanguard declines relative to the rise of non-western powers, the global level of international society will weaken. Anti-hegemonism will add to this weakening, and reinforce a relative strengthening of

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[83] Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), esp. pp. 301–21.
[84] Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez, 'Conclusions', in Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez, eds, *International society and the Middle East*, pp. 226–50.

regional international societies as non-western cultures seek to reassert their own values and resist (at least some of) those coming from the western core. The result would be a decentred international society in which different regions, including the West, pursued their own cultural values and regional international orders.[85] This is perhaps closest to Wight's rationalist, coexistence model, and the diffusion of power it involves would again eliminate O'Hagan's tension.

A global-level international society would still exist, based partly on the successful diffusion and naturalization of some western values, and partly on the pragmatic necessity for all cultures of cultivating a degree of social order at the global level. But the global level would be thin, representing a second-order pluralism among the regional international societies. Such a structure would perhaps revive Wight's little-used idea of secondary systems formulated to capture the suzerain-state systems seen in the eastern Mediterranean during the later second millennium BC, and around the Mediterranean in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD. These secondary systems shared a diplomatic *lingua franca*, rudimentary diplomacy, dynastic alliances, treaties of commerce and some sense of order.[86] The strength of international society at the regional level would reflect the higher 'degree of cultural unity' to be found there, while its weakness at the global level would reflect the lack thereof. This would solve the contradiction between hegemonic practice and the legitimating principle of sovereign equality by removing hegemonic practice from the global level (though perhaps intensifying it within regions).

Failure

This outcome envisages the deep failure of both Vanguard and Syncretic homogenization. Here the western attempt to impose a Vanguardist conversion along liberal lines would not only fail, but also generate sufficient backlash all round to block syncretism as well. The result would be the extreme version of the clash of civilizations in which different cultures exaggerated their differences, went their separate ways and possibly fought major wars. The outcome could be a set of regional armed camps at uneasy peace or a struggle for global dominance. Either way, international society at the global level would shrink to the minimum necessary for basic communication.

How one evaluates the probabilities of these outcomes depends partly on the impact of inherently unpredictable events (environmental, political, economic, scientific) on world politics, and partly on the weight one gives to the Vanguardist and Syncretist accounts of the expansion story. From where we are now, all four seem possible, though perhaps failure is the least probable. This being so, the main issue boils down to whether some form of relatively homogeneous, globalized

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[85] Charles A. Kupchan, 'After Pax Americana: benign power, regional integration and the sources of a stable multipolarity', *International Security* 23: 2, 1998, pp. 40–79. See also Riemer and Stivachtis, 'European Union's enlargement', pp. 21–2; Mohammed Ayoob, 'From regional system to regional society: exploring key variables in the construction of regional order', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 53: 3, 1999, p. 251; Jackson, *The global covenant,* p. 128.

[86] Wight, *Systems*, pp. 23–6.

international society is going to emerge, or whether a more layered, regionally differentiated, post-colonial group of international societies will take shape, with only a weaker secondary society at the global level. Since these outcomes are ideal types, mixtures are also possible. Perhaps the key difference between Vanguardist and Syncretist homogenization is political, lying not so much in the actual content of the homogenization as in the kind of process it is understood to represent. A Vanguardist account of the expansion of international society will be more offensive to, and resisted by, the non-West. A Syncretist one will be more congenial and consensual.

Conclusions

What, then, can one conclude about the instability hypothesis? As the four scenarios above suggest, the monocentric Vanguardist model certainly could produce instability. But they suggest equally or even more strongly that there is nothing inevitable about an unstable outcome. Both the Vanguardist and Syncretist homogenization models look towards stable outcomes based on processes of cultural interaction and adaptation. Both models see culture as malleable. Where they differ is in whether cultural fusion is a one-way or a two-way process. The layered model also looks towards a stable outcome, albeit on a much more decentralized basis. Wight scores a point for his concern about the resilience of culture, and the difficulty of managing an international society without sufficient shared normative foundations. But he loses a point for not bringing into the argument his own idea of secondary systems, and not seeing how the Vanguardist process could in fact end up producing the stability of a pluralist secondary system. While the layered model represents a partial failure of the Vanguardist (and Syncretist) processes, it is only a *partial* failure. These processes leave behind enough shared culture to support a potentially stable secondary international society.

This discussion offers some answer to James's point about Wight's vagueness on the 'degree of cultural unity' necessary to generate a stable international society. Obviously, as James implied, an international society based on a culture shared only among elites would be rather fragile. The actual outcome of the expansion story suggests a considerably more robust development. Some of the more liberal institutions (democracy, human rights) are contested even at the elite level. Some, such as the market, are still mainly vested at the elite level. Until the end of the Cold War, the market was one of the core contested issues among the Great Powers, the rival principle being centrally planned economics. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the move away from a command economy by China, the market has become a global institution in the sense that most states conform to market rules, and powerful intergovernmental organizations exist to support this conformity. While many states and some peoples support the primacy of the market out of belief, it could be argued that many others adhere to it because of calculation or soft forms of coercion. If western power were to decline, weakening coercion and changing the balance of calculation, it is not yet clear that the market

would survive as a global institution. Yet the fact that China, and increasingly India, are opening themselves to the market in ways that are probably irreversible has enormous implications for extending the reach of shared culture. One might see this development as a major step in the extension of open access orders from the (now more or less unified) core to major actors in the periphery.

Quite a few other institutions, too, have become substantially naturalized across many populations. At the level of state elites, sovereignty, territoriality, non-intervention, diplomacy, international law, Great Power management, nationalism, self-determination (though not all versions), popular sovereignty, and the progress and equality of people(s) are all pretty deeply internalized and not contested as principles. Particular instances or applications may excite controversy, for example where they involve resentment of Great Power management, or opposition to certain bids for self-determination based on cultural nationalism. But the basic institutions of a pluralist, coexistent, interstate society have wide support among states, and fairly wide support among peoples and transnational actors. Most liberation movements seek sovereignty. Most peoples are comfortable with nationalism, territoriality, sovereignty and the idea of progress. Most transnational actors want and need a stable legal framework. Even as western power declines, it does not seem unreasonable to think that most of these pluralist institutions will remain in place, as too might the modest and, one hopes, increasing level of commitment to environmental stewardship.

Certainly humankind has not yet reached either Vanguardist or Syncretist homogenization, and may not do so in the foreseeable future. But some major institutions of international society do have depth as well as breadth of support, and do constitute an important form of shared politics and culture. There are now no competing political universalisms of the type that so worried Bull and Wight. It can certainly be argued that the West, and particularly the US, sees itself as representing a universalism; but, unlike during the Cold War, the other subglobal interstate societies are primarily concerned with maintaining their distinctiveness at the subglobal level, not trying to remake the global level in their own image. This is probably true even of Islam, which operates mainly outside the state level, and seems more on the defensive against the cultural hegemony of the West than embarked on a jihad for global dominance. This is what makes a failure outcome unlikely, and would make even the layered outcome stable. The main difficulty facing the continued development of international society is not ideological, as it was during much of the twentieth century, nor yet cultural, as feared by those who adhere to the Vanguardist account or to Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis. Instead, it is the more political problem identified by North et al. of how to build an international society that contains both open access orders and natural states. That fault-line does much to explain which institutions of international society have taken root worldwide and which have not. A stable international society cannot be built on institutions that threaten the integrity and survival of many states, and are as likely to produce failed states as successful transitions to open access orders.